

Reports point to state tests as big stressors for schools

By Zachary Matson



GAZETTE FILE PHOTO BY MARC SCHULTZ Students enter Craig Elementary School to start the 2015-2016 school year in September 2015.

CAPITAL REGION — A pair of unrelated studies released last week shed light on the ways that annual state assessments are stressing both students and the overall school environment.

One report, released by the state school boards and school psychologists associations, outlined how state tests create higher levels of student anxiety than local tests do. A study from the Benjamin Center at SUNY New Paltz outlined the “fixed costs” of testing that also eat up significant instruction time.

Taken together, the reports counsel caution while education officials look to overhaul the state’s testing regime. But the New Paltz report warns that, when accounting for time taken to prepare for and administer assessments, New York schools may exceed by 100 percent the percentage of instruction time that is supposed to be devoted to tests — 1 percent of the total school year.

“When students are engaged in this testing process, they are not engaged in learning,” New Paltz researchers Robin Jacobowitz and Kathleen Tobin wrote in their report. “And when teachers are engaged in this testing process, they are not engaged in teaching.”

Moreover, school psychologists across the state reported an uptick in test anxiety among their students since the state implemented its new assessment, which is aligned with the Common Core learning standards, according to the “Anxious for Success” report released last week.

While most school psychologists reported that fewer than half of their students displayed adverse physical symptoms of anxiety from the testing, 61 percent reported that test anxiety was on the rise. And none of the report’s survey respondents said the level of test anxiety had decreased with the new test.

Two-thirds of the psychologists either “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that teacher evaluations tied to testing was a source of the student anxiety. They also cited high expectations from parents and teachers as roots of the stress.

The New Paltz report examined the “fixed costs” of testing, the time it takes to set up classrooms, count out tests, administer instructions, as well as the “displacement” effects that testing might have on the rest of the school.

When accounting for “fixed costs,” the researchers estimate that schools spend about 2 percent of annual instruction time administering state tests. The state Legislature has capped the amount of annual instruction time spent on tests at 1 percent.

The researchers conclude that reducing the length of tests for students would have “minimal effect” on the share of instruction time used for testing, suggesting that reducing exam days would have a greater impact.

“You can reduce the number of minutes in the tests, but you are still going to have the fixed costs,” said Jacobowitz, who leads education research at the Benjamin Center. “We need to think very carefully about the number of days dedicated to testing.”

The study also examined how organizing an entire school around a week of testing can “displace” classroom activities for students who may not even be taking a test, citing closed libraries and entire classes moved to make room for students who are being tested.

But beyond stressing out students and chewing up instruction time, the annual tests may be causing larger schoolwide disruptions. When education officials tie assessment performance to funding or labels — such as “struggling” or “persistently struggling” — that carry extra requirements, schools begin to overemphasize testing to the detriment of student learning, University at Albany professor Heidi Andrade said.

“There is a lot of pressure on test scores, whether that is appropriate or not,” she said.

Andrade favors a greater focus on teachers using classroom-based assessments aimed at monitoring the progress students

are making, as well as equipping students with skills to assess their own progress and identify their “gaps in knowledge.” She said teachers need to learn more about how to use their own assessments.

“We are getting a lot of information [from tests], but it’s not clear that we are using it in ways that are helpful to students and teachers,” Andrade said.

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